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ABSTRACT

These guidelines are adapted from Verderber and Verderber's "Inter-Act," a manual for interpersonal communication. The examples are from English composition classes, but the general principles are applicable in any situation involving criticism. Guidelines for giving constructive criticism include making the criticism relevant and appropriate to the context, describing the situation carefully and accurately first, offering both positive and negative criticism whenever possible, being specific, and explaining how to improve. Guidelines are then offered for seeking advice in a manner that will foster the interactive exchange necessary for constructive criticism. They include being sincerely receptive to an honest response, avoiding contradiction between verbal and nonverbal communication, reacting positively to people who respond appropriately, specifying the type of criticism desired, remembering that almost any criticism can be helpful, and confirming that the criticism has been understood. (YLB)

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Giving and receiving constructive criticism

By Jeffrey Leptak

How often have you heard someone say, "I don't mind criticism as long as it's *constructive*?" Students wail, "My paper is *bleeding*!" Verderber and Verderber define the much sought-after but seldom-seen constructive criticism as any response "that provides people with information about themselves" (1983, p.155). Fortunately, the process of constructive criticism is not merely an intuitive skill—it can be taught and learned.

The following guidelines are adapted from Verderber and Verderber's *Inter-Act* (1983), a manual for interpersonal communication. Giving and receiving criticism is a reciprocal relationship; understanding both aspects is essential for an effective exchange of information. Practice these recommendations when responding to student work, evaluating staff performance, or receiving an evaluation. If using diads or larger learning groups, teach these methods to students to relieve the pressure felt by those giving criticism and to allay the fears of those receiving it.

The following examples are from English composition classes, but the general principles are applicable in any situation involving criticism.

Giving Constructive Criticism

1. *Make the criticism relevant and appropriate to the context.* Address the objective or performance task at hand. For example, if the student is practicing information writing skills, do not focus on a lack of entertainment value in a writing sample. That is a related, but different skill, to be practiced and criticized another day. Most importantly, criticize the problem, not the person.

2. *Describe the situation carefully and accurately first.* Before offering critical judgment, discuss specific observable details. Whenever possible, phrase your comments to distinguish between objective observation and subjective evaluation. Do not let students think they have violated the laws of the universe if in fact dissent is possible, even among the experts.

3. *Offer both positive and negative criticism whenever possible.* Although we all know the value of positive reinforcement, criticism is usually negative. Strive to maintain a balance between positive and negative comments. Moreover, some students genuinely under-estimate their own abilities; if they become discouraged, they may see the task as beyond their abilities. Such praise must be sincere, however, or your criticism will have little impact.

4. *Be specific.* Whenever possible, offer your criticism in active verbs, unambiguous adjectives, and concrete nouns. Also avoid emotion-laden words, what semanticists S. I. Hayakawa (1978) calls "snarl" words and "purr" words. For example, a student may correctly interpret a comment such as "colorful vocabulary" as a compliment, but incorrectly think you merely appreciate words with many syllables, leading to more frantic searching of thesaurus. The student heard the "purr," but missed the message.

5. *Explain how to improve.* To avoid leaving learners feeling frustrated or helpless, suggest some alternatives. However, explaining how to improve does not mean actually making the improvement. When criticizing, offer demonstrations or examples of more appropriate responses, but still allow learners to do their own work. Consider a pair of students doing peer editing. If the student in the critic's role merely inserts all of the commas missing in a writing sample, the other student has a perfectly punctuated paragraph, but lost the opportunity to rehearse the rules for comma place.

Receiving Constructive Criticism

Few people enjoy evaluating the work of others. Some of us doubt our competence to judge others. Other critics recoil in anticipation of defensiveness or anger from recipients. There are even ethical concerns about the use of power and the damaging effects of exclusively negative criticism. But because students and employees

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know they are not perfect, most actually want to know how to improve. Following these guidelines when seeking advise will foster the interactive exchange necessary for constructive criticism.

1. *Be sincerely receptive to an honest response.* Do not ask "What do you think?" if what you really mean is "Tell me what a great job I did." Once the potential critic understands our quest for praise, you will have difficulty getting insightful criticism when you really want it.

2. *Avoid contradiction between what you communicate verbally and nonverbally.* If you ask for criticism with your arms crossed and a mean gleam in your eye, other people will respond to your threatening body language instead of your request for guidance. The tone of your voice might also make your solicitation sound more like a dare than a genuine need.

3. *React positively to people who respond appropriately.* Critics need positive reinforcement too. Reactions such as "Thanks for the input—I hadn't seen it that way" or "What led you to that conclusion?" encourages your respondent to continue giving constructive criticism.

4. *Specify the type of criticism you want.* General questions about ideas or feelings lead to general answers with little value. When you ask people if they like your work, the probable response is "It was OK," which gives little direction for improvement. Guide your critic with questions about specific details, such as "Did my introduction get your attention? Does my thesis state the point of the paper clearly enough?"

5. *Remember that almost any criticism can be helpful.* Instead of treating negative feedback as a derision of your personal character, think of it as revealing new information. You can benefit from knowing how others perceive your work or how it affects them, even if you do not agree with them.

6. *Confirm your understanding of the criticism.* To avoid misunderstanding, you should interpret, question, or paraphrase what you think you heard or read. When a critic says, "Perhaps you should completely rethink this argument," you might respond, "So you think I need more supporting evidence?" If the critic actually meant something else such as a complete change of topic, you will hear about it, and then you understand each other.

In *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*, Brookfield (1986) notes the near-unanimity among adult learning theorists about the value of group learning methods for fostering self-discovery, critical reasoning, problem-solving, and community growth. On the other hand, Brookfield warns that discussions may become "arenas of psychodynamic struggle and fields of emotional battle." (p. 139). Following the above recommendations will increase the benefits and reduce the possible detriments inherent in any critical dialogue. the result will be more rewarding relationships from which all can learn, whether our peers are students or colleagues. **AAACE**

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